Introduction
Researchers and policy-makers are increasingly interested in how people evaluate satisfaction with life. In this sense, improving well-being involves a challenge for everyone. Education, especially adult education, is often presented as an instrument of social change that can promote social development and well-being. In our paper, we consider ‘well-being’ in the subjective sense (e.g., self-evaluation of life satisfaction and happiness). The term also refers to psychological aspects: personal growth, purposeful and meaningful goals, self-acceptance, self-esteem and self-efficacy (Keyes, Shmotkin & Ryff, 2002).

Inspired by the paradigm of lifelong education, adult education has claimed that social change is fundamental and that people’s well-being can be a consequence of the dynamics of social change. Education can play a central role in this scenario. The lifelong learning paradigm has significantly changed the role and uses of education. Adult education has been ‘instrumentalised’ to define important learning as education that is useful to the economy and the labour market, the type that transforms people into flexible and employable objects capable of obtaining and maintaining jobs. At the same time, the responsibility for learning has been displaced to the individual level (Lenz, 1999), so the state is no longer accountable. Learning may influence well-being, and this study examines the benefits of learning experiences on adults’ lives.

Theoretical framework
Many social scientists have discussed the role of learning in the lives of adults. Jarvis (2009) notes that learning can be seen as an individual process throughout the life course. However, learning also involves “networks of people learning and living together and each are affected by the others” (p.7). Furthermore, “(...) our
present learning is also affected by our biographical past and our learning is a present phenomenon situated in our own life-world within the wider society, both of which have their own history and their own present” (Jarvis, Holford & Gouthro, 2011, p. 286).

Lifelong learning is a sign of societal changes (Salling Olesen, 2004). Lifelong learning can be understood as a process of learning through all stages of life, including all spheres of people's lives. “All forms of learning are of equal importance in contributing to the achievement of knowledge, skills and attitudes which are necessary to function well at work and in society” (European Commission, 2006, p. 9).

Jenkins (2011) notes that participation in adult education is related to developments in several areas of psychological well-being, including self-esteem, self-confidence and self-understanding. Field (2009) states that his experience of working with adult learners provides examples of people who have gained confidence and optimism as a result of successful learning.

In this framework, it is possible that well-being should be defined differently. According to Field (2009), the impact of learning on well-being is a new topic in educational and social research. The impact of education is felt at different levels. For example, education has a ‘direct effect’ on well-being by helping people to develop capabilities and resources that influence their well-being. It also influences the social and economic environment of people’s lives. Thus, education has numerous consequences because it is connected to ‘better health, higher levels of social and civic engagement, and increased strength in the face of external crises. So, if adult education is already affecting the life chances of people directly, it can also affect them indirectly, by increasing their well-being’ (p.14).

Well-being has been generally defined as

“a dynamic state, in which the individual is able to develop their potential, work productively and creatively, build strong and positive relationships with others, and contribute to their community. It is enhanced when an individual is able to fulfil their personal and social goals and achieve a sense of purpose in society”

(Government Office for Science, 2008, p.10).

We consider well-being a “social process with material, relational and subjective dimensions” (White, 2010, p.158) that comprises three key dimensions: material
(welfare, assets and standards of living); relational (social relations and capabilities, attitudes toward life and personal relationships); and subjective (people’s perceptions of their material, social and human positions and their cultural values, ideologies and beliefs). According to Simões et al. (2001), subjective well-being involves people’s evaluation of their lives in terms of satisfaction or emotional reactions. Therefore, subjective well-being depends on a person’s own assessments of his or her past and present life in terms of cognitive (life satisfaction and quality of life) or affective (feelings of joy, pleasure or happiness) qualities (Bowling, 2010).

**Methodology**

This paper stems from a research project titled “Changing Lives – Literacy in Adult Education (PTDC/CPE-CED/105258/2008)”, which focused on understanding adults’ literacy practices. The subjects of our research are adults who had left school for reasons related to economic and family issues, low self-confidence, low self-efficacy and ‘negative experiences’ with the formal educational system. These adults have in common the fact that they subsequently re-enrolled in education through adult centres that provide public Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL).

The project methodology is based on questionnaires and interviews with adults involved in RPL, which were conducted before, during and six months after they were certified. The aim is to understand the evolution of literacy practices in these adults’ lives. We use a biographical perspective in which biographicity (Alheit, 1995) is central. Despite the overwhelming nature of structural constraints, biographies present the potential for transformation. Biographicity, in our own research, means the potential for transformation posed by transitional learning. When adults who have long abandoned school return to learning, this situation represents a challenge that may involve the returning students in a process of biographical learning (Alheit, 1995) that makes them aware of the potential for transformation.

We hope to answer the following questions: does their participation in RPL processes make adults feel more autonomous, optimistic and self-confident? What are the benefits and consequences of these learning experiences for the well-being of these adults? Can adult learning promote well-being in adults’ lives? Can learning trajectories affect the well-being of adult lives?

**New opportunities for adults’ lives**
Victoria is 55 years old, married and has two sons. During her life, she has lived in several places in Portugal. At school, she completed only the sixth grade because of family financial constraints. She began work immediately after dropping out of school. She worked as a dental assistant, and she is presently unemployed. On her own initiative, Victoria decided to enrol in an adult centre through RPL. When she obtained the 9th grade certificate, Victoria felt like a new person, with higher confidence and self-esteem. Victoria believes that learning also carries other types of benefits: she feels more support from her family, and her husband constantly encourages her to attempt secondary certification. Victoria claims that RPL helped her to develop a new perspective on her life. For her, these learning experiences contribute to development in adult personal, professional and social skills. After she received her certificate, she bought a diary in which she writes her life story, including secrets, confidences, thoughts, and feelings. She also began buying postcards to write poems she dedicates to her daughter. When she feels alone, she reads this special book.

Carrie is 48 years old and married. She only completed the sixth year before her mother forced her to abandon school. The sadness caused by dropping out accompanied her throughout life. She made an initial attempt in the RPL system but soon abandoned it because of problems with the educators from the RPL centre and because of her fear of the unknown; new situations and contexts make her uncomfortable. Carrie worked in an architecture office but became unemployed. The Institute of Employment and Training forced her to enrol in an RPL centre to avoid losing state support. She was very anxious with this return to education, especially because many years had gone by since she dropped out of school. Over time, she gained confidence and was able to achieve a 9th-grade certificate. Learning made Carrie look at life with a new perspective. She values her learning processes at both professional and personal levels. She feels greater self-confidence, believes her experience to be important and feels that experience and learning should be regarded as socially valuable. Education can influence people’s well-being by helping them to acquire more knowledge and, consequently, to gain respect and happiness. She wanted to go further with her education, and now she is attempting secondary certification and an English course. She believes that these two certifications are important for finding a job.
Rose is 34 years old and lives with her husband and two sons. She completed the sixth grade and then married. She had a job at a school (cleaning and watching the children during class breaks), but now she is unemployed. Rose was “forced” by the Institute of Employment to enrol in RPL. She thought that RPL was a difficult challenge and was both afraid and curious. With support from the centre’s pedagogical team, she was able to obtain the 9th-grade certificate. Rose is proud of her achievement and claims that returning to education renewed her ‘willpower’ and made her willing to learn more. She intends to continue secondary studies. She stresses that recent changes made her the person she is today, and she emphasises that the knowledge she has acquired allows her to help her daughter with her homework. She now reads newspapers and the Bible. Recently, she began attending an Information and Communications Technology (ICT) course.

Paul is 57 years old, married and was born in Lisbon. He abandoned primary school because of his family financial situation. He started to work when he was only 10 years old. Years later, he came to Algarve and began a job as a meat cutter. Unfortunately, he became unemployed. In an RPL centre, he began work toward a 6th-grade certificate. Later, he registered for the 9th-grade processes. He claims that RPL educational processes have been very good for his life because of what he feels they have helped him accomplish. He claims to have learned to write more correctly and to do mathematics, and he has developed knowledge in ICT. Although he has not been able to find a job, he talks of the social and personal benefits that resulted from these learning processes, using words such as ‘satisfaction’, ‘pleasure’ and ‘it is never too late to learn’.

Discussion
Our discussion focuses on the previously defined research questions: do adults who participate in adult learning feel more autonomous, optimistic and self-confident? What are the benefits they gain from these learning experiences and the consequences for their well-being? Can adult learning promote well-being in adults’ lives? Can learning trajectories affect the well-being of adults’ lives?

There is an obvious commonality in the biographies presented here: all of these adults have the subjective feeling that returning to learning made them more self-confident, autonomous and optimistic. This not only benefits their well-being but also seems to give these adults the necessary personal resources to go further on their
educational paths. Some are already participating in additional courses that they feel are important. This might seem trivial, but we believe that it represents a structural change and the ability to envisage new possibilities for their lives. In other words, education is the dimension that is most likely to lead to the unexplored potential in these adults’ lives. Considering that our subjects share a history of dropping out of school and severe economic, social and cultural constraints, their initial perceptions towards education and training are not positive. Returning to education, however, seems to restore their belief in the value of education, learning and training. Similar results were found in other investigations of RPL in Portugal (see, for instance, the results of an external national evaluation, Carneiro, 2009; see also Barros, 2011). Although the immediate effects of this change cannot provide adults with access to a new life or job or to rapid improvements in income, this education may be a first step towards something better – at least in these adults’ subjective perceptions. This effect of ‘wanting to learn more’ seems a natural consequence of the use of biographical methods in RPL centres. If we look at our adults’ biographies on their own terms and attempt a contextually situated interpretation (rather than interpreting the results as they would relate to middle-class, well-educated adults with access to important resources), we believe that all of these adults discovered something new with their return to learning. They gained new awareness of their experiences and biographies. ‘When we reflect on our life path, we understand that we know more than we thought we knew. And this fact is an incentive for self-esteem and motivation to learn more’ (Antunes, 2005, p.42).

The transitional learning these adults received from their RPL experience is quantifiable. In specific areas, adults mention progress in writing and reading skills, mathematics and ICT, or awareness of the importance of learning English. Some of these improvements may have instrumental uses, whereas other forms of learning seem to be reflected in more personal and subjective dimensions. The example of Victoria, who started a journal, writes poems and builds new emotional forms of communication with her daughter, suggests the possibility of broader considerations. Generally, our unlimited faith in the transformative effects of education and learning leads us to look for enormous (or, at least, substantial) changes in people’s lives. For example, it might be logical to expect that a small window of learning in the midst of a disadvantaged biography would provoke an earthquake of individual – or even collective – structural changes or noticeable emancipation processes. In our view,
however, this is neither logical nor expected. Victoria’s example is important when considered within Victoria’s life course. These examples remind us of the importance of Peter Alheit’s thesis concerning biographical learning, namely his trust in the everyday competence of people to act independently upon their own biographies. That is, despite the structural constraints she experienced throughout her life, learning led Victoria to discover new emotional resources and new forms of expression and reflection. To us, this indicates autonomy and a certain degree of control over her biography. The remaining biographies include similar details that indicate areas of subjective learning directed towards pleasure and satisfaction, which can be seen as part of well-being. Even if the overview of these adults’ life histories is marked by dead-ends, difficult transitions or periods in which they could not see alternatives to improve their lives, they now have signs of hope for a strategic direction, usually involving further education or training.

Although we do not have space to present our results on the specific processes delivered in the RPL centres, the methods used by trainers, or the perceptions of adults towards the centres and their pedagogical teams, it is important to note several points. RPL centres constitute a friendly learning environment for adults. Beyond the individual relationships educators build with these adult learners, there is a collective dimension of the learning process. This dimension explains why adult learners so often emphasise the support they receive from trainers and colleagues and the effects of learning on socialisation with their friends or family.

In conclusion, we believe that these four adults' biographies demonstrate the positive effects of adult learning for subjective satisfaction, pleasure, and happiness. At this level, learning can promote well-being in adults' lives.

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**References**